



We Need New Names

By Oduor Obura



In late 2019, the Luanda Boda Boda Riders' Association purchased a bus for public service. The association is located along the Maseno-Luanda border and its membership is largely drawn from the Luanda and Maseno catchment area.

The name of the association has a lot to do with the state of our union as a country or even as a region. It is a microcosm of ethno-nationalist tensions existing in Kenya and many other regions of Africa, and the changing times that bring new and multiple ways to negotiate these invented differences. The boda boda association is a chance to look at how we negotiate citizenship daily, and how we can overcome some essentialist ideals that are so deeply entrenched in eastern Africa.

The boda boda association draws membership from Luanda and Maseno, two small towns that are barely three kilometers apart. Maseno was established as a mission town and gets its name from *oseno*, which is a Luo word for the indigenous tree that used to be dominant in the area before ecological colonialism. The Kinyore (the Luhya sub-group inhabiting the Maseno and Luanda corridor) calls the same tree *luseno*. *Oseno* has since been colonised by the blue gum commonly called *bao*, which is indigenous to Australia. Young people would be at pains to identify *oseno* in Maseno today. Shortly before colonialism, Luanda had been established by a Luo chief from Gem Yala. Currently Luanda is dominantly a Luhya town, and it is located in Vihiga County. I have grown to like the sound of Maseno. For me, the word conjures pleasant images of green hilly spaces.

Imperial creations

Kenya, like the majority of other African countries, has never been a nation-state. Kenya's territorial boundary, as we now recognise it on maps, was drawn exactly a hundred years ago, in 1920. It is a border that split, for example, the Luos into three different countries (Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania). As part of these colonial processes, the Somali people were also split into three countries, with a section of them occupying Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia and Somaliland. It is instructive to recall that coastal East Africa presented similar challenges. The current Zanzibari semi-autonomy in Tanzania and the conspicuous *Pwani Si Kenya* slogan are witness to the inherent pressures in the formation of nation-states in this part of the world. The boda boda riders in Maseno-Luanda zone show us only too well how we have an incomplete sense of ourselves and our politics when we are inclined to always think and conceive of ourselves and our communities as complete.

In 1929, the colonial administrator, Charles W. Hobley, said, "The Kikuyu and its blood relations on the slopes of Mount Kenya are, next to the Kavirondo, the most numerous native society in Kenya colony. They have no internal homogeneity, so were brought under control section by section."

Therefore, the Kikuyu as we popularly know them today, are a creation of the colonial empire and each section was amalgamated onto another until they were made to imagine themselves as one whole part. This imagination has seeped into the dominant Kikuyu popular imagination, yet tensions still exist on who should claim the authentic Kikuyu title and name. A popular myth names Murang'a as the place where Mumbi first set foot, and thus the Kiambu Kikuyu are actually considered proper Kikuyu as opposed to the Murang'a Kikuyu who have interacted with the Embu and Meru communities. It is weird how we still stick to these categories as authentic, without the slightest examination of the histories and names behind them.

Electoral voting patterns and the legendary Kiambu-Muranga division still remind the Kikuyu of their incompleteness as a nation. This also applies to what we have think of as the Luos, the Luhyas, etc. The "tribes" (I will use the terms community or nations) as we see them today were invented in the colonial era. The introduction of a centralised and domineering government was a creation of the British empire. It was created along the Westphalian Christian state system to enhance resource extraction and organise labour along pliant and easily micromanage-able paradigms in Kenya.

Before colonialism, local communities had several centres of power, not necessarily along political lines, but sometimes along religious leaders and familial loyalties. This is still evident in the way religion plays a major role in our conception of ourselves and their celebrity status in national governance dialogues. As an illustration, Mgahanya, the rainmaker of the Banyore community in colonial Kenya, drew his power not from politics but from his hereditary technology of controlling rains. Indeed, Mgahanya's power would be sought by the Luo neighbours as well whenever the need arose to have a rainmaker present. For his prowess and popularity, Hobley gave Mgahanya the title of a principal chief, thereby instilling new ways of looking at a rainmaker, not as a helper in the society but as someone who had the power to lord and rule over his relatives, friends and foes with an iron fist. Mgahanya's rainmaking power was finally, and dramatically, curtailed by Hobley himself. In divesting Mgahanya of his political power gained through rainmaking, Hobley instituted new ways of gaining power in the society. Power would never be the same again in eastern Africa.

Evidently, government in pre-imperial Kenya was largely by consensus. But this was not always the case. The Mazrui family's control of the slave trade in Mombasa reminds us that consensus was not always the default governance case in colonial and pre-colonial Kenya and that power was not always benign. In other words, the long history of governance in Kenya has experienced ruptures and transformations. Perhaps this history, culture and knowledge of power might be useful when we finally decide to finally form a government that is focused on ourselves. This would be a better

alternative to the exhausting gerrymandering the political elites in Kenya frequent.

Moreover, Hopley, in *Kenya: From a Chartered Company to a Crown Colony*, further notes that he played an important part in reviving the importance of the Kiama among the Kikuyu, but of course to enhance colonial government. The idea of a Kikuyu elders was revitalised and invented as an essentialised entity by the colonial government. While reconstituting the tribe for the colonial agenda, Hopley instructed the heads of the Kiama (for whom he invented the title “chiefs”) to be detached from their compatriots in order to give proper judgments. In one instruction, the Kiama authority was not only centralised but also given sweeping powers and stripped of communal ethos and emotions. The colonial reconstruction of African societies was an unmitigated cultural disaster whose legacies we still contend with in present-day Kenya, such as the nationalist insinuations in differentiating Luos from the Banyore people in the Maseno-Luanda corridor.

From Hopley’s new ways of creating and accumulation of power, political leaders in Kenya have since stuck to the idea of leadership as a manifestation of paramount chiefs. The impersonal detachment and the attempts by public officials to centralise power can also be seen in how Kenyan doctors perceive their patients, how head teachers treat poor parents, how immigration and customs officials mistreat Kenyans in their own country, how bus conductors mishandle passengers, and how factories pollute Lake Victoria and its environs with impunity. The colonial system is replicated in every public sphere. Scarcely does one transcend this system.

The Westphalian state

After the end of colonialism, we did not take stock of our various systems of power and ways of naming in the community. Rather, we adopted and imported the Westphalian state model that was used to institute various hegemons, with each community waiting for a turn to lord over other communities. The communities that have been at the helm have ensured that the patronage system instituted by Carey Francis, Charles Hopley, and Lord Delamere, among others, has been perfected for a post-independence Kenya. Community nationalism as a basis for mobilising power is a narrative that has been employed in Kenya. This happened right from the first Kenyan president to the present president, since they could not pursue an alternative Africanist ideology with which to administer the country. They failed to either take notes from or apply the history of the country as far as governance was exercised. They lost a grand chance to decolonise governance and bring back the government to “we the people” of Kenya. And now Luanda boda boda riders have shown us how one can undermine such dominant narratives.

To appreciate this, one needs to understand that Maseno-Luanda is divided along “Luo” and “Luhya” communities. During each election period, this division is amplified by politicians. They incite tribal animosity among people who ordinarily intermarry, language differences notwithstanding. Indeed, the dhoLuo language has evolved to use *Semeji* or *Omejo* in reference to Luhya in-laws. That is how frequent intermarriage occurs here and how transcultural conversations have been conducted here despite the politicians and Kenyan comedians who frequently prop up negative ethnicity in their speeches and performances, respectively.

Maseno was the place the Church Mission Society (CMS) missionaries established the first Anglican church in western Kenya, circa 1906. The two communities grew around this church. Along with the growth of the church, the established ethnic differences also grew. Thus, Maseno Mixed Primary School would later be created, not as a mixed school for boys and girls, but as a mixed school for Luos and Luhyas! The idea of “mixed” in this case was founded on ways of negotiating cultural differences and not to denote gender.

For a while, in its long history, this primary school had its own Luhya and Luo staff coming to teach

at different times of the day. Independence-era Kenya would see the split of this Maseno Anglican church into North and South. Maseno South diocese became the Luo church while Maseno North diocese became the Luhya church. The growth of Maseno as a mission town was doomed due to its cultural topography. The Maseno South diocese relocated its headquarters deep in Luo land, to Kisumu. Maseno North pushed its diocese deep in Luhya land to Kakamega. In other words, a single Christian religion could not keep its adherents from the two cultures together. This was the design of the colonial government. Each community would be coalesced together within itself, especially as a way of breaking down each community's governance structures. But inter-community solidarity would be robustly discouraged. Mgahanya would eventually be appointed a principal chief within the Banyore community, after all his power was no longer needed among the neighbouring Luo, for Hopley had effectively taken charge of administering the Luo nation.

The independence-era Kenyan state also drew a border between the two communities, locating Maseno in Luo Nyanza and Luanda in Western Province. This imagined boundary was based on the colonial separation of the Luo from the Luhya. What if the boundary was to be re-drawn along matters that boda boda operators find useful, such as geographical features, and not along ethnic territories? For boda boda operators, features such as hills, muddy terrains, valleys and flat lands denote how much fuel a motorbike consumes.

We need new solidarities

Can we have associations not based on the colonial structures, like this boda boda group does? Africans are saddled with the burdens of colonial structures that the post-colonial elites simply refuse to supplant. Post-independence Kenya has cost lives, in the name of the community. The Kenyatta presidency quickly consolidated ethnic capital to misrule the state. Ethnic patronage quickly grew deep roots and it has irretrievably thrived, until now. Nearly all the chiefs under Moi rule were imperial personalities in their own right and might, just like they were in colonial Kenya.

We need new solidarities like the Luanda Boda Boda Association, but devoid of unchecked rugged capitalist ambitions. Kenya's model of its solidarity is based on capital accumulation. In the fullness of its agenda, organisations founded on purely commercial interests morph into monopolies and create the same trap that the founders initially ran away from: poverty, disempowerment and powerlessness for others. The Luanda Boda Boda Association might not be cognisant of the fact that the public transport business is usually the function of an operational government. Even if they are, they have chosen to ignore that, under the illusion that they are working hard and sustaining themselves. The self-employment agenda of this association rips apart ethnic loyalties because it co-opts Luo and Luhya communities.

I am not into economics, here, I am on the use and ab-use of names - how innocent names like Luanda Boda Boda Association circumvent a nationalist current. The afterlives of this name embrace the inclusion of other communities not associated with the cultural geography of the Maseno-Luanda route. The association teaches us how to bring back two communities that have been divided by colonial and post-colonial Kenyan rulers. Resiliently, the people still head back to certain elements of solidarity that existed way before the arrival of Hopley and his imperial British associates.

At the same time, we might have to remember that Luanda was founded by a Luo chief, as we are reminded by Bethwel Ogot who convincingly presents this event in his autobiography *My Footprints in the Sands of Time*. Contrary to its founding, Luanda is currently located in a Luhya-administered ethnopolis. The street-level motorcycle association undermines the political narrative in the control of Maseno-Luanda borderlands. The politics of Maseno-Luanda is pegged on community divisions. These boda boda motorcyclists, however, teach us lessons on cosmopolitanisms.

It is also instructive to recall that the Maseno-Luanda topic is a divisive factor and always comes up during election periods. However, the boda boda riders frequently move in and out of Luo and Luhya “tribal” zones conveniently and daily, with or without electoral cycles. If only the road network could catch up with the socialised motorcycle networks! These riders transcend the names and political divisions that were issued by the colonialists and their successors in post-colonial Kenya.

Boda boda riders transport passengers with little reference to ethnic origins. They move within and around the Luo and Banyore nations. Indeed, the motorbikes work across the tribal difference in a way that seems to shorten the already -narrow cultural distance between the two communities. In the process, they circulate cultural contacts between the two, and defy the political elite who thrive on the divisions. And now their bus will move passengers beyond Luo and Luhya nations. Linguists will observe the historical and structural complexities that separate Luloogoli, Libukusu and Kinyore from the Luo language, the obvious one being that dhoLuo is a Nilotic language and the other dialects belong to the Bantu language family.

The thing with language is that one owns the power to name things, to make a world with yourself at the center, to rewrite (hi)stories of far-flung peripheries. Take the ethnonym Luhya, as an example. Before this coinage, the Luhya were part of the Kavirondo people. The Kavirondo was initially the Eastern Province of Uganda before it was switched to Kisumu Province of the East Africa Protectorate, and finally moved to western Kenya. The umbrella term Kavirondo included both Nilotes and Bantus around Lake Victoria, all the way to Mumias and Mount Elgon. The freedom of colonialists’ naming of African communities was an enactment of the powerlessness of these communities vis-à-vis the colonial imagination and grammar. Within the Luhya nation there are a total of about 17 linguistic groups. The term Luhya is an artificially constructed ethnolinguistic reference to many closely related (some of which are not mutually intelligible) Bantu-speaking peoples. They include the Bukusu, Tachoni, Wanga, Marama, Tsotso, Tiriki, Nyala, Kabras, Hayo, Marachi, Holo, Maragoli, Idakho, Isukha, Kisa, Nyore, and Samia in Western Kenya. Their cultural divergences are many and multilayered, with the Tachoni tracing their ancestry to the Nilotic group of Nandi in the around the 14th century.

To fit yourself in a name that classified and considered you part of exotica needs careful self-extraction out of such languages. This need is even more immediate when one remembers how this classification was done without the agency and input of the local people and their collective consciousness and knowledge systems. Thus, the iLoikop people are made into Maasai, the iSampuru became Samburu. The various communities known as Nandi, Kipsikis, Pokoot, and Tugen are collapsed into an easily classifiable and ruled “tribe” called Kalenjin. This is in spite of the cultural and linguistic differences between them. In these cultural acrobatic movements mediated by colonialist linguistics, Kakamega (spelled as Kakumega in colonial orthography) was not the name of a town but an ethnonym in reference to the Idakho and Isukha communities.

If language is a unifier of cultural, economic and social values, then we need a new generation of names. We need Names 2.0. These names could consider political and cultural differences and histories. We need a new name for a governance that will neither be called kleptocratic nor a kakistocracy. We need new names for Luos, who pride themselves in Nyikwa Ramogi (based on a point of origin, not a colonial classification). Don’t we need a new name for the daughters and sons of Mumbi? We need new names that denote plurality, but account for differentiated identities, like the Mijikenda. (My translation of “Mijikenda” would not be a tribe but “nine homes”.) We need decolonised names in order to open or transcend some of the worlds which were closed by colonial naming processes.

Renaming ourselves might not be an easy way to redesign our nominal worlds, which were forced

into cruel unions in Berlin in December 1884. It might even prove to be a messy but it is still a necessary activity. We need to open these worlds that were closed by colonial naming processes, like the Luanda Boda Boda Association has done. Every time we use these new colonial names, we acknowledge the problematic grammar that inherently operates within them. We also reiterate that the names did not aim to usefully matter to Africans. We repeat the insufficiency of English to capture the nuances that exist in our cultural worldviews and political lives.

I must reiterate here that these names were not arbitrarily drawn; they were created to enhance control. Perhaps post-colonial eastern Africa should ask what control mechanism the various ethno-nationalities initiate. For example, the Luhya group is one of the reminders that ethno-nationalism is an invention that is a mirage. It was created for divide et imperium purposes. As Bethwel Ogot reminds us, there was no Luhya empire prior to colonialism. Yet the colonial history implies the presence of a Luhya empire. The Nabongo Mumia was no threat to the neighbouring Kager clan. However, as a paramount chief, Nabongo Mumia, was a creation of the British to pacify western Kenya, especially to control the northeastern Kager clan of the so-called Luos.

We need new names, *donge*?

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